

Ovidius University Constanta
Humanist Studies Doctoral school
Philology

**Theories of dramatic representation in
Chekhov's theater
-abstract-**

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Abstract

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Introduction

The theories of dramatic representation in Chekhov's theater are an attempt to standardize the interpretation and analyze the dramatic structures specific to the work of this huge writer. It is a complicated itinerary by the multitude of sources and opinions, amateur or knowledgeable, by the numerous interpretations and perspectives, as it happens, in fact, with the works of all the great writers.

First of all, the research has as object of study a topic that has preoccupied us over time, as a person involved in theater, but also as a teacher, who, in working with students, wants to share with them the mechanisms intrinsic, but also extrinsic of Chekhov's dramaturgy.

Secondly, a substantiated analysis from the perspective of the practitioner, but also of the theorist can offer a much richer, nuanced and inspiring image of new research directions.

The first chapter presents the great writer and the connection between him and the need for psychological realism, a current that he fully dominated, although it was populated with long-standing names. His life was his main source of inspiration, and the experiences he went through, mostly traumatic, an inexhaustible source of creation. We then present the main perspectives from which Chekhov looked at the world and, implicitly, from which he led his creative material. First of all, we will refer to his basic profession, that of doctor, which will profoundly influence Chekhov's perspective on the reality of life, but also of the work. Then we will discuss the other perspective, of an imperious tragedy, that of the sick. For more than half of his life, Chekhov lived under the rule of tuberculosis, a relentless disease that profoundly affected his quality of life. Being a doctor, Chekhov was able to realize, moment by moment, the evolution of this terrible disease, which cut his life at only 44 years old, thus ending a career that was announced to be extraordinary. The third perspective we will talk about is that of the nature lover. As banal as it may sound, nature had a huge impact on Chekhov's work, populating the spectacular dramatic space chromatically and symbolically. Chekhov had a position of watchman, critic and, why not, even a protester. He protested against intellectual and mental imprisonment, arguing that no matter who puts a seal on a doctrine, people should think with their own minds and choose with their own souls and not be influenced by slogans and frightened by the oppressive power. Under the shaping pressure of tsarism fall personal positions of thought, spontaneous attitudes, natural feelings, they are replaced by absolute truths, rigid and nebulous, which no one is allowed to question, but to which everyone

must submit. He sincerely believed that there was still hope, he sensed the revolution and, with it, the transformation of social and individual entities. He sincerely believed that the truly macabre spirit of this society alters the most natural relationships between people and that this is one of the main reasons for the almost complete decay that characterized the times in which he lived.

One of the most important achievements of Dr. Chekhov is the attempt and success to deeply understand his time, to snatch the most intimate truths and to reproduce it in his writings. One of the deepest dramas is that he failed to cure her. He believes that there are mysteries of existence, there, somewhere in the depths of the mechanisms that set the forces of the world in motion, and he is eager to reach them and thus nourish his work, in order to give them back to the people. And this approach did not start from a stubbornness or the pressure of an instinct, but from a need to satisfy the understanding of the idea. He firmly believes that this is truly his purpose and will not stop searching until the end of his life. Hence his need to maintain relationships with people, although, often, the effort was discouraged or he felt betrayed. The doctor, the sick and the nature lover are three essential roles from the perspective of which we can analyze Chekhov's theatrical world and its dramatic constructions. There are three completely different dimensions at first glance, but we will see, more similar than one might think. When, on the night of July 2, 1904, Anton Pavlovich Chekhov said clearly and lucidly to the doctor *Ichsterbe* (I will die - n.a.), death was not for him an unexpected event or a terrifying nightmare.

Chapter two deals with Chekhov's dramaturgy, his innovations in the field of writing, in the construction of characters, dialogues, subjects, the way in which he manages not to fall prey to the currents of thought, very strong at that time, the balance he manages to maintain between personal and professional life. Conciseness is one of the most important features of Chekhov's work. Simplicity, stinginess, so to speak, with which Chekhov uses the words, cleanliness and essentialization are just as many attributes that can describe the style of the great master and with which he probably would not agree. This simplicity is also related to the intention to capture reality down to the smallest detail. Chekhov wanted readers and viewers to be able to figure out just a few gestures and words about a character's background, his existential experience, his fears, or how he was educated, who and what that character is, and why he finds in that place, at that time, in that conjuncture. And he thought that just those gestures and words were enough. Silence is a way to communicate in Chekhov. Silence says more than hundreds of lines, and its significance is lasting and has a huge impact on the psychology of the characters and the atmosphere of the play. Silence creates a kind of negative space, which attracts, like a black hole, the incipient dynamics of the play and forces them to become real. Dramas pass through the human soul, and silence is one of the most mundane states in reality. Perhaps in this silence with which the writer greets the

evolution of each character, in the filter of objectivity that he applied on the lens through which he looks at life, we find correctness, sincerity, wisdom and genius.

The "seagull" was born from the turmoil of his own existence, the need to discover truths, the feeling of essential searches and the often upsetting lack of clear answers. In this play, Chekhov often speaks through the mouths of various characters, embraces their destiny to a certain extent, and the conflict between these heroes represents to some extent the struggle with himself. That is why we can find Chekhov in both Treplev, Trigorin and Nina. At first glance, nothing is sensational in "The Seagull". There are no capital dramas, there are no revolutions, but the common character of the dramas, in which the silent and sober heroes seem to be against reality, creating their own pathetic and emotional history, gives birth to the impressive. In this play, ordinary people, who have spent most of their lives drinking tea, arguing endlessly or mourning their sadness, boredom and unfulfilled dreams, and often longing for another existence, pass before us as in one of their habits and similar days. And so it is revealed what poisoned their lives and dried up their youth. It is the world of limitation, of predatory selfishness, of pettiness. She thwarted the heroes' talent, love and freedom, and here is the source of their drama. For their sufferings are not caused by events or people who, once removed, would remove their drama. Here the mechanism of a society, its harsh laws, acts irremediably.

"Uncle Vania" is a play about non-change. Nothing happens, like the others, and no one dies. If in Chekhov's work we have enough deaths - suicides, murders and duels, here are no deaths. The atmosphere is special, oppressive and generates negative energies. All these characters are kept under observation, they are extremely sensitive to the slightest change of state, they meditate on each other, they look at each other, they analyze each other. From the discussions that only seem to scratch the surface of things, the truths come out and outline a tormented and frustrated world, and the atmosphere becomes suffocating, sneaks insidiously into the story, like a fog that takes the minds and ends up suggesting infinitely more than what the characters say. This hidden unrest, which contaminates relationships between people, has a deep cause. Nothing is really beautiful in their lives.

"The cherry orchard" is one of the most beloved pieces of the great writer. The work begins masterfully, with a beautiful image, collected by Chekhov, no doubt, from his beloved estate, Melihovo, where he planted and cared for apples, cherries and sour cherries, gardening being his most enjoyable occupation, after writing. The orchard has been a victim since the beginning of the play. First we find out that the trees are old and then that it is very cold for this period, that it gives frost.

In the play "Three Sisters" we enter, in fact, the echoes of the writer's turmoil and a significant part of the society of the time. Heroes understand that they live in a world whose laws

are flawed and which disintegrate with themselves. None of these characters can be saved by a relationship with others, by a connection with a noble idea, by an effective generosity; but they foresee and await the revolutionary storm, which will shatter the shell of their destiny, reuniting their lives and giving them meaning. As in the other plays, the three sisters feel the need to work, even though they do. It may seem like a paradox, but they refer to that work, which is really significant, to make a difference. The routine of their work gnaws at them from within like a tuberculosis bacillus, destroys their youth, their will to be and live. They are tired and weak and the only light that rejuvenates their cheeks and minds is to go to Moscow.

Chapter three is reserved for Stanislavski's System and Method, which is practically the actor's workbook of all times and all spaces. Stanislavski created special methods of interpretation and staging for Chekhov's theater, and therefore the great playwright will have a very special relationship with the Art Theater and its initiator. Moreover, here he will meet the one with whom he will fall in love with Olga Knipper, an extraordinary actress who worked under Stanislavski. The so-called "Stanislavski system" is, in fact, a flexible, fluid and easy to assimilate way to learn, in other words, to put the Method into practice. The crossroads and dissatisfaction of the two masters, Stanislavsky and Chekhov, proved to be beneficial to the entire universal theatrical world. The works and the way of thinking of the two complemented each other until they reached a perfect whole. But each show involved a titanic work, taken, each time, from the beginning, because each Chekhovian play had a different premise, a different atmosphere, a new psychological dimension that Stanislavski had to understand, explain to the actors and work with them until they, in turn, could show the public that they understood. Stanislavski discovered the path of intuition and feeling thanks to Chekhov because, in order to infiltrate the deep meanings of his plays, he had to first probe his own interior. Konstantin Stanislavski has dedicated his entire career to discovering the mystery of artistic creation in the art of acting. The mechanisms that he tries and improves with each repetition end up turning into a system. This system, Stanislavski's System, provided fundamental laws in the actor's art and in the creative process, the rules being simple and the result must always be plausible.

Chapter four deals with the American heritage and the echoes of Stanislavski's work across the ocean, from then until now. We mention the most prolific disciples who also became masters: Lee Strasberg, Stella Adler, Sanford Meisner, Viola Spolin and others. Lee Strasberg founded "The Lee Strasberg Theater Institute" in New York and Los Angeles, adopting a working method according to the principles and procedures of the Stanislavskian system, later those of Vahtangov, but also his own interpretations of the concept, respectively the reality of inner motivation, it must be real and personal. The actor must not limit himself to the circumstances imposed by the character, he must look for a reality different from what the play proposes, a reality

that helps him to obtain an appropriate behavior, in accordance with the requirements of the role. He must not mimic thinking, he must think of something real, concrete. Both improvisation and emotional memory are the basic elements that preoccupied Strasberg in particular.

Stella Adler is the initiator of the famous New York school, "Stella Adler Conservatory of Acting". He goes to Paris where she learns the Stanislavskian method from the master itself. It manages to corroborate its method with the teachings accumulated during the period spent in the French capital and to pass it on to her students. It supports the imagination as a source of talent in the actor's art and recommends a series of exercises aimed at personalizing the real. She differs from Lee Strasberg in that he emphasizes the real, with Adler emphasizing the imaginary. She argues that the actor's concern should be to detach himself from the opinions of those around him, to ignore the advice regarding how you build a role, everything you build, think you have to form them yourself, but this only if you have become aware of your personality and have come to know yourself fundamentally.

Sanford Meisner's method is considered the simplest, least demanding, but most effective. The predominantly used method is repetition (a phrase is repeated several times until it gets rid of the emotion specific to the moment of utterance and the essential is discovered, the action simply). For Meisner, "playing" means "doing."

Viola Spolin's method completes the system through a manual of pedagogical and directing techniques. He created a well-structured study through his book *Improvisation for Theater*, a book that presents well-structured theatrical games. He exemplifies and explains each term by stating for each stage through numerous exercises that help a practitioner to develop his teaching career. His book is a textbook of pedagogical methodology, a method that has not only educational but also psychological value, making us aware of the individual nature of ourselves and others.

The exercises proposed for the actors are sensory awareness, imagination training, attention, observation, concentration, spontaneity, creativity, relaxation to gain the peace of mind to think coherently, to process and react naturally to the proposed situations. Thus we gain the freedom to express ourselves freely, we discover the team spirit, we gain self-confidence, the power to control, the defeat of shyness, disinhibition.

Chapter five presents a difficult documentation work in the field, namely in Constanța. The best staging of Chekhov's plays, which saw the lights of scenes in our city and testimonials of great actors who played "Chekhov" roles - is a unique approach in the local and national space and, we would add, extremely necessary. In sixty years - from 1954 to 2014 - in Constanța were staged six shows based on Chekhov's plays, one of which consisted of three pranks in one act. Each of them lasted for at least one season. As we have mentioned and explained several times

throughout the work, Stanislavski's theories and experiments regarding the actor's art are, even today, the basis for the training of all artists around the world. Thus, the actors, wherever they are, start from a common ground, the differences being made in the depth of documentation, insight, inspiration, intellect, discipline and talent. The great actors in what we call Hollywood, the largest film industry in the world, are all trained at the Stanislavskian school and have all gone through the caudine forks of playing a role in Chekhov's drama. I picked up some testimonies of the most striking figures of the scene and the big screen. Simon Russell Beale, Sir Ian Mckellen, Judi Dench, Ian Holm, Sir Anthony Hopkins, Ralph Fiennes, Ewan MacGregor, Patrick Stewart are just some of the greatest actors in the world, who played the Chekhov characters, who understood and he adores Chekhov.

Chekhov's dramaturgy cannot be detached from interpretation, and this is where Stanislavsky, the great master without whose innovations Chekhov's theater would not have existed and who would not have changed the perception of the creators of illusions and that of the public as he did, enters the scene. Stanislavski's descendants took his System and Method across the ocean, and today we are talking about Stanislavski's "American legacy." Practically, all the great actors in Hollywood are dependent on the great Russian, because all theater schools were nourished by his "System" and Method. Thanks to Stanislavski, Chekhov plays today everywhere, all over the world, in all theaters, art schools, theater and cinema, at all levels. For his work is offered to anyone who has enough patience and a consistent intellectual baggage and even if initially it seems an impossible wall to break through, in time, the Chekhovian reality becomes like a wall on which the actor hangs his trophies.